

Melodrama!

The Mode of Excess
from Early America
to Hollywood

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FRANK KELLETER, RUTH MAYER

The Melodramatic Mode Revisited. An Introduction

1. Melodrama and the Modern Imagination

"Darwin, Freud and Marx were all products of the melodramatic imagination," writes Christine Gledhill in the introduction to her influential 1987 volume on melodrama and the 'woman's film' (20). In what follows she concentrates on the filmic varieties of the melodramatic mode, but the very fact that she sees no need to elaborate or reference her sweeping claim attests to the changed status of the melodramatic in our days. What used to be regarded as a low form of cultural expression, recently came to be reevaluated as a significant type of representation. In current scholarship, then, melodrama no longer figures as a derogatory concept, associated with cheap effects, quick entertainment, and distraction from weighty moral questions. Instead, melodrama is now increasingly invoked as a serious and central category to assess the modern cultural imagination in general. Gledhill was by no means the first critic to point at the indebtedness of entire traditions of nineteenth-century thought to the melodramatic imagination.¹ But her volume, together with some other studies of melodrama in the late 1970s and 1980s,

¹ In 1987, Gledhill could already draw upon a series of critical studies to substantiate her claim. She explicitly refers to Wylie Sypher who maintained as early as 1948 that "melodrama is a characteristic mode of 19th century [sic] thought and art" (260). Gledhill could also have mentioned Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Tangled Bank*. Likewise Peter Brooks notes that the "talking cure" of Freudian psychoanalysis resonates with the "drama of articulation" ceaselessly enacted by the melodramatic imagination (201). Since then, several other scholars have followed up with close readings and analyses of nineteenth-century philosophy and science in terms of the melodramatic, primarily focusing on Karl Marx (cf. Lansbury; Kemple).

SHANE DENSON

Incorporations: Melodrama and Monstrosity in James Whale's *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*

James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) are not only thematically *about* (human-technological) hybridity but are also something of hybrids themselves. Not strictly horror films nor just sci-fi, Whale's classic adaptations of Mary Shelley's novel refuse easy generic classification much as the novel itself resists being pigeonholed in conventional terms. This can be seen as one of the strengths of the films, a sign of their originality and their director's genius. On the other hand, like all hybridities that make a difference, these films sometimes occasion uneasiness—viz. for critics whose interests lie in one of the conventionally defined genres: Michael Sevastakis, in his discussion of early American horror films (xvi), and J.P. Telotte, in the context of science fiction (72), both feel compelled to defend their interest in these hybrid specimens. But while this more glaring form of generic cross-pollination has not gone unnoticed, critics have failed to acknowledge another important element of hybridity in Whale's *Frankenstein* films: massive doses of *melodrama* are injected into their narrative and formal realization, with the effect that the conventions of filmic melodrama in Hollywood are problematized even while in their formative phase.

The incorporation of melodrama in *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* can be seen as an early precursor of postmodern 'pastiche' in film—and quite a fitting one, for the disruptive potential of pastiche (if there is one) lies precisely in its 'monstrosity,' as an affront to normative categories and conventions. But the self-reflexivity of the films' infusion of melodrama goes beyond this abstract connection to the overt narrative focus on monstrosity. For the 'incorporation' of melodrama is double: these are not just films that incidentally *add* melodramatic forms to their melange of horror and

sci-fi, but *melodramatic tales of the quest for a fitting body*. By embarking on this quest, Frankenstein enters a love triangle with science, and his bride-to-be must compete with its disembodied seductions. The creature, on the other hand, is in search of a bride for himself; struggling against the odds imposed by society, the "monster" also becomes something of a melodramatic hero. Frankenstein's repentance in the end, his return to a 'natural' love relationship, and the creature's eventual recognition of the impossibility of such an existence for himself all fit the narrative patterns of melodrama. Beyond such patterns, the overdramatized characterization and acting styles, the rhythmic punctuation of light and dark in the visual construction of a manichaeian "moral occult" (Brooks) underlying the overt action, and the films' 'lowbrow' natures generally—all of these contribute to the melodramatic qualities of Whale's *Frankenstein* films.

In what follows, I will first demonstrate, with reference to Peter Brooks's classic study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, how integrally melodramatic structures and techniques are incorporated into these dramatizations of Shelley's Gothic novel. Then, in the following section, I focus on the films as melodramas of incorporation. This analysis points, finally, to a third level of 'incorporation': as I shall argue in conclusion, Whale's self-reflexive incorporations of melodrama/melodramas of incorporation highlight and problematize the intimate connection of ideology and bodily practice in the spectatorial hermeneutics of melodrama.

Melodramatic Incorporations I: Monstrous Manichaeism

First, we should note the close historical relationship between the Gothic novel and theatrical melodrama. As Brooks argues, both genres represent reactions to the loss of the "Sacred," to the ethical and epistemological "void" left by modernity's progressive demythologization of the universe (16-20). Their common cause is to demonstrate the existence of a realm of moral and spiritual truth beyond mundane reality in an age of doubt. Towards this end, they must resort to excessive means, breaking with conventions of verisimilitude: psychological motivation in melodrama, like physicalistic realism in the Gothic novel, are sacrificed for a higher, moral purpose. These generic affinities help explain the common bor-

rowings from Gothic literature by melodramatic theater, and they make the possibility of a melodramatic *Frankenstein* appear more likely than one might at first suppose. The likelihood of its realization on film seems even greater when we take into consideration the many debts cinema owes to stage melodrama.

As the goal of melodrama is "to locate and to articulate the moral occult," which Brooks defines as "the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth" (5), constant recourse is had to "an underlying manichaeism" (4) of good and evil as the polarized forces driving the world (and its dramatic representation).¹ The metaphorical "conflict between light and darkness" (5) is indeed the motor of Whale's narratives, and it is made literal in the *mise-en-scène*: an alternation between the dark settings of diabolic undertakings and the well-lit locales of innocence and virtue underscores the cosmic stakes of the plot. *Frankenstein* opens with a nighttime grave robbery; assistant Fritz steals a brain from the university by cover of night; and the famous creation scene takes place, of course, on a stormy night. Daytime scenes are interspersed to provide relief from the suspense and horror of these events: the Gothic setting of Frankenstein's tower lab is juxtaposed with bright scenes in his father's house and garden, where fiancée Elizabeth (played by Mae Clarke) lives, fearing her betrothed has gone astray. Elizabeth herself is clad in white, and backlighting produces a veritable halo around her, emphasizing her innocence and natural goodness. Contrasts of light and dark thus contribute to characterization, which, in keeping with melodrama, is established by means of visual signs. As Brooks claims for melodrama in general, "the characters have no interior depth, there is no psychologi-

¹ Brooks's conception of melodrama, developed to explain classical stage melodrama and with a view towards the modern novel, may seem, in this respect, too 'essentialist' to deal with later, filmic manifestations such as the 'family melodrama.' Ben Singer offers a useful corrective in defining melodrama as a "cluster concept" (44). He includes "moral polarization"—along with pathos, overwrought emotion, nonclassical narrative structure, and sensationalism—in his list of melodrama's "primary features" (58), but adds that not all of these need be present in every case or type. My primary reliance on Brooks, and particularly my emphasis on manichaeian structures, is justified in the present context by the theatrical and filmic traditions of 'sensational melodrama' informing Whale's films.

cal conflict" (35); instead, "melodrama exteriorizes conflict and psychic structure" (35), so that characters are swept along the surface of the manichaeian forces indicated by light and dark, black and white.

As I have been suggesting, the alternation of light and shadow is more than just an element in Whale's visual aesthetic. For here the visual is intimately connected to the narrative dynamics of the films. The visibility of Elizabeth's purity, for example, is central to the establishment of conflict in the plot of *Frankenstein*. Her natural innocence is the polar opposite of Frankenstein's artificial experiments; she is clearly the legitimate recipient of his affections, but he has been seduced by technology. The sanctioned union of their marriage is threatened, and Mae Clarke's exaggerated acting style reinforces Elizabeth's sincere concern for Frankenstein's well-being. Her visually conveyed virtue, juxtaposed with Frankenstein's dark pursuit of science, establishes a central conflict between natural and artificial forces as the driving motor of the plot. Frankenstein (portrayed by Colin Clive) is thus figured, as Brooks claims of 'man' in melodrama, as "playing on a theatre that is the point of juncture, and of clash, of imperatives beyond himself that are non-mediated and irreducible" (13). He is intersected by natural and unnatural desires, but in time he repents and returns to Elizabeth. Significantly, this takes place in an idyllic outdoors scene, where he expresses regret and agrees with Elizabeth that the wedding should take place "soon." His repentance is thus marked by a return to Nature—literally, in the setting of beautiful foliage, and metaphorically, in turning away from the unnatural seduction of technology and back to a natural (i.e. heterosexual) relationship.

The conflict of desires to which Frankenstein is subject—by which he is driven as a character—does not, however, indicate the presence of a psychologically deep realm in which he is 'torn' in any serious sense. Whereas classical melodrama generally externalized the forces of good and evil in clearly identifiable heroes and villains, later adaptations of the mode often located the confrontation within a single character. Brooks cites Victor Hugo's theater in this regard, claiming that "any illusion of interiority, depth, or psychological complexity that this struggle gives is dispelled upon close examination. The forces themselves remain integral, and the character who is the arena of their struggle never gains psychologi-

cal coherence or consistency. He is himself a kind of theatre of the sign" (93).

If this is the case in *Frankenstein*, its sequel comes a good deal closer to the structures of classical melodrama. Frankenstein having returned to the fold, the main narrative begins with a scene of virtue and (marital) bliss. But, typically for melodrama, "there swiftly intervenes a threat to virtue" (29) in the person of one Dr. Pretorius, who violates the sanctity of the couple's bedroom to solicit Frankenstein's help in a diabolical undertaking: the creation of a female counterpart to the monster. Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger) is clearly a villain: robed in black, his face is consistently lit from below, casting deep shadows across it. The motivation for his monstrous project is unclear, apparently lacking altogether. Brooks offers that "evil in the world of melodrama does not need justification: it exists, simply" (33). The epithet "mad" underlines Pretorius's unmotivated, arbitrarily volitional, and completely irrational evil. Within seconds of his appearance onscreen, his complete characterization has been established with certainty. His arrival gives credence to Elizabeth's suggestion, expressed in exaggerated melodramatic rhetoric, that "the devil" is behind all human pursuits of forbidden knowledge. If Pretorius is this devil, Elizabeth's angelic appearance (now embodied by actress Valerie Hobson) has been heightened to emphasize the cosmic scale of conflict, and religious imagery abounds in the film. This time there is no question, though, about Frankenstein's moral position. Taking strength from Elizabeth, he is able, at least initially, to resist the temptations of "the dark side." Later, the kidnapping of Elizabeth gives Pretorius the necessary leverage to blackmail Frankenstein. Not hubris, but iron necessity as a result of virtue's imperilment dictates Frankenstein's pact with the devil. His complicity in Pretorius's plan is the necessary price of melodramatic heroism, for only so can virtue be saved from certain doom. In *Bride of Frankenstein*, therefore, the relative sophistication of the earlier film's manichaeian conflict is simplified—externalized and personalized—and the moral roles of the characters are as clearly visible as the clothes they wear.

According to Brooks, melodrama's manichaeian structure is a means to its moral goal: the "recognition of virtue" in a post-sacred era (27). "The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence in the world. Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social

order" (13). As a "drama of recognition" (27), melodrama requires the recognition of evil as a prerequisite to the public recognition of virtue and the reestablishment of value generally—both within the dramatization and in its relation to the spectator (49). In Whale's films, the purging of the social order is enacted in the villagers' pursuit of the monster. Though Frankenstein himself is responsible for the creature's existence, the monster embodies the unnatural force to which, in 1931, Frankenstein is attracted but which he eventually resists. Moreover, the creature is responsible for the death of an innocent child; in the melodramatic repertory, "children, as living representations of innocence and purity, serve as catalysts for virtuous or vicious actions" (34). In 1935, the monster holds Elizabeth captive; the creature is thus a threat to virtue in both cases, one that must be eliminated for the common good of society.

Finally, the decisive turn from Shelley's Gothicism towards a melodramatic *Frankenstein* comes in the films' 'happy endings.' As Brooks points out, melodrama "tends to diverge from the Gothic novel in its optimism, its claim that the moral imagination can open up the angelic spheres as well as the demonic depths and can allay the threat of moral chaos" (20). Shelley's novel ends with the mutual destruction of unnatural creature and hubristic creator, but Whale's films condemn the monster while reuniting Frankenstein with Elizabeth in a purged social order. Significant here is not merely the difference between optimism and pessimism, but that a specifically moral aim is expressed in the melodramatic restoration of order. "Melodrama is less directly interested [than the Gothic novel] in the reassertion of the numinous for its own sake than in its ethical corollaries" (20). That is, in subjecting virtue to peril, but in staging its eventual victory over evil, melodrama insists on the "existence of a moral universe which [...] can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men" (20). In 1931, the monster must die (apparently) for its threat to the 'natural' social order, while the repentant Frankenstein is able to escape the burning windmill where the final standoff is staged. A toast is then made to his health, his marriage, and the birth of a child. In *Bride of Frankenstein*, the now wholly virtuous Frankenstein complies with Pretorius's evil plans to create a mate for the original monster (who, alas, is not dead); but, rejected by his intended 'bride,' the monster recognizes his own lack of virtue and destroys himself, Pretorius, and the would-be mate, allowing Frankenstein and Elizabeth to escape

back to normality. In both cases, order is restored, nature saved, and 'normal' familial relations reestablished.

Melodramatic Incorporations II: The Search for a Fitting Body

Having focused up to now on the incorporation of melodrama *into* Whale's films, I am concerned here with the way in which these films embody "melodramas of incorporation." The most obvious reference of this expression is to the plot level, for both *Frankenstein* and its sequel concern the search for a fitting body: Frankenstein's attempt to create a living being from corpses in 1931, and the resulting monster's search for a female companion in 1935. However, the full significance of these corporeal quests goes well beyond the narrative level. Whale's melodramas of incorporation engage larger questions concerning the formal and ideological characteristics of melodrama generally. This becomes most apparent at the intersection of monstrosity, muteness, and corporality figured in composite bodies of the monster and his bride.

In the first film's opening credits, Frankenstein's creation is referred to as "The Monster," and the actor's name (Boris Karloff) replaced by a question mark: "?" This may seem to be of merely marginal interest in terms of the film proper, but we can read it as a first announcement of a basic dilemma with regards to the creature: for the creature, there is a dilemma of *identity*, and for us one of *classification*. Stitched together from various bodies, how can we say *who* this is? More fundamentally, though, *what* is it in the first place? The word "monster" and the "?" are in a sense equivalent; for a "monster" is an aberration from the natural order, thus unclassifiable because lacking a corresponding concept. Conceptually undefined, "monster" is a variable, an "x" in the place of that which cannot be identified. For what it is, if truly monstrous, is *unspeakable*. Interestingly, in Whale's film this unspeakable quality of monstrosity is turned back on "the monster" itself: the creature is denied speech, and thus the means of defending itself against designations thrust upon it from without.

There is, of course, a certain irony in the fact that, right at the beginning of the sound era of motion pictures, a mute creature should gain the iconic status that Karloff as the monster achieved. The mute role is, however, pervasive in classical melodrama, a fact

that Brooks links to the expressive impulse of the genre: accordingly, melodrama is essentially a struggle to articulate the moral forces in the world. Muteness thus provides a dramatic obstacle to "the expressionism of the moral imagination" (55)—as when a mute character is falsely accused of some crime—but its significance goes beyond plot motivation. Brooks devotes an entire chapter of *The Melodramatic Imagination* to what he calls "the text of muteness" (56-80). Under this heading, he concerns himself with the many non-verbal means of expression appealed to by melodrama, from mute tableau, music (from which melodrama derives its name), to the expression of emotion through the exaggerated gestures characteristic of melodramatic acting. The literally mute character thus has a place in the larger context of the melodramatic aesthetic, and it is relevant here to consider briefly the historical and ideological roots of this constellation.

Historically, the mute character derives from pantomime. The pre-Revolutionary patent system in France, which censored verbal expression in non-sanctioned theatrical productions, led to great innovation in the visually expressive repertoire of popular theater (63). Without the spoken word to convey meaning, scenery had to be expressive (46), banners and flags with printed text supplemented the action (63), and music underscored emotional states (48). After the official end of censorship, the visual devices retained an importance in popular theater, and, most importantly, the central use of gesture as an expressive means in pantomime was translated into what we now know as 'melodramatic' acting. Brooks claims that "the whole expressive enterprise of [melodrama] represents a victory over repression [...] conceive[d] [...] as simultaneously social, psychological, historical, and conventional: what could not be said on an earlier stage, nor still on a 'nobler' stage, nor within the codes of society" (41). Here we approach the link between the historical and ideological reasons for the continuing appeal of muteness in a melodramatic theater allowed to speak. For related to the lowly roots of popular theater and to philosophical reflections on the origins of language alike, "a deep suspicion of the existing sociolinguistic code, as of its image in the classical theatrical code" (66) was according a deeper significance to embodied, non-verbal gesture. Here, it was believed, a truer, more immediate expression could be achieved than through linguistic means. The quest for the

origins of language led back to mute gesture as a universal, natural language capable of communicating "ineffable" meanings.

The appeal of muteness for theatrical melodrama, as a 'democratic' genre concerned to reassert the presence of moral forces in a post-sacred era, consisted in its supposed ability to make this higher drama immediately legible to all spectators. The decline of the sacred had eroded the consensual basis for the communication of ultimate values by conventional means. Thus, in Brooks's words:

The use of mute gesture in melodrama reintroduces a figuration of the primal language onto the stage, where it carries immediate, primal spiritual meanings which the language code, in its demonetization, has obscured, alienated, lost. Mute gesture is an expressionistic means—precisely the means of melodrama—to render meanings which are ineffable, but nonetheless operative within the sphere of human ethical relationships. (72)

As the 'democratic' theater was gradually eclipsed in popularity by film, elements of the former naturally found their place in the latter. I do not wish to suggest, however, that this was an even process of linear 'development.' For one thing, between the appearance of melodrama around 1800 and the rise of film, the very modernity to which melodrama responded had changed. A more pronounced capitalism, the "hyperstimulus" of urban modernity, and new technologies all transformed the stage melodrama, which became more sensational and technology-dependent (both in its formal realization and diegetic employment of machines onstage).² For a time, film coexisted with 10-20-30s melodramatic theater (so called for the price of admission: ten, twenty, or thirty cents); the exhibition of early film—a "cinema of attractions," to use Tom Gunning's phrase—was in fact incorporated into an encompassing "variety format" (Hansen 29) which brought theatrical performance, film, and other entertainments under a single roof. It was the advent of the nickelodeon that, due to economic savings for audiences and exhibitors alike, ultimately enabled film's takeover of melodrama (Singer 167-68). But rather than undergoing a radical transformation, sensational stage melodrama was essentially *continued* by fil-

² See Singer, especially Chapters 5 and 6. Singer adopts the term "hyperstimulus" from New York social reformer Michael Davis, who coined it in 1911 (65).

mic melodrama of the early and 'transitional' eras: not only the narratives, but also the *mise-en-scène* and theatrical style of these films (not to mention the actors, writers, and others involved) were simply imported from the theater.³

Moreover, with a new restriction on the spoken word, this time by way of the technological limitations of silent cinema, the excesses of melodramatic acting styles were reinvested with necessity. Muteness was no longer a choice, and gesture was once again required as a central expressive means. Significantly, cinema made a virtue out of its necessity, repeating the strategy of classical melodrama. Indeed, cinema was in quite a similar situation as the theater of a hundred years before. For essentially, the problem of the post-sacred "void" was one of the disintegration of "a unified audience committed to identical social and moral values" (Brooks 82), to which melodrama reacted with its 'universal language' of mute gesture. By the twentieth century, an intensified modernity had only exacerbated the problem of the audience, and the emerging institution of cinema formulated for itself a remarkably similar solution: the medium of film itself, due to its non-verbal means, was figured widely in the transitional period as a 'universal language' legible to literate and illiterate, rich and poor, recent immigrant and long-established citizen alike.⁴ (Interestingly, the name for Universal Studios, the company responsible for Whale's *Frankenstein* films, was inspired by this universal-language argument for the 'democratic' nature of cinema.)⁵

In this context, we might say that Karloff's mute monster was something of a carryover from silent film into the sound era, much as the mute character in melodrama was retained after the necessity imposed by censorship was abolished. We can thus postulate a genealogical line of descent leading from pre-Revolutionary pantomime and its connection to philosophical speculations about the origins of language, by way of melodrama and silent cinema, to the creature of Whale's 1931 production. But if, as I have said, there is an irony in the monster's muteness at the beginning of the sound

era, we are now in a position to see how deep that irony goes. For the 'ineffability' of meanings allegedly expressed by mute gesture is a function of their inarticulability by linguistic means. So conceived, 'the ineffable' comes quite close to 'the monstrous' as that which is unspeakable because it eludes conceptual classification. But where mute gesture (and film itself) allegedly reaches the plane of *natural* language at its origin—a universally legible form of expression—the muteness/monstrosity of the creature is a result of *unnatural* forces that account for his incomprehensibility.

We are back to the manichaeon forces—nature and anti-nature—which led Frankenstein on his quest for the fitting body. But we see that the monster is even more centrally, because corporeally, located at the point of their intersection. The monster is thus poised to become a melodramatic hero himself, to assert his virtue in the face of great social—and, as we see, ontological—odds. In *Bride of Frankenstein*, the monster embarks on an odyssey towards expression, morality, and humanity—the central terms of melodrama—and his search for recognition leads him in the footsteps of his creator: onto a quest for a fitting (i.e. complementary, female) body.

The pivotal scene, and indeed one of the most overtly melodramatic of the film, occurs when, persecuted and pursued into the forest, the creature is drawn towards a hut, visibly moved, by the sound of music: a hermit plays Schubert's "Ave Maria" on his violin. The lonely blind man bids the creature inside, welcoming him as a "friend." Showing empathy for a fellow "afflicted" creature, he shares his food and drink and offers the monster his bed. Melodramatic music underscores the hermit's prayer of thanks to God, who "hath brought two of thy lonely children together, and sent me a friend." A close-up reveals a tear rolling down the creature's cheek, and a cross on the wall glows eerily as the shot fades to black. We then see the two sitting together, the old man offering an English lesson. The creature repeats the words "bread" and "drink," commenting "good, good," and the two seal their fellowship with an impromptu eucharist of bread and wine and a vow of friendship. The creature's movement into the realm of language and human interaction culminates in an internalization of morality, as he pronounces, "Good. Bad." He appears more human now than ever before, 'enlightened'—and indeed the lighting on his face is soft, the shadows on it almost absent. Eyes wide open, he seems to under-

³ This is not to say that filmic melodrama exactly reproduced sensational stage melodrama, but the continuity greatly overshadows the disparities. See, in this regard, Singer, especially Chapter 7.

⁴ See Hansen, especially 76-81.

⁵ Hansen 78.

stand the great truth of a fundamental moral distinction, recognition of which is so central to the melodramatic mode.

But the fellowship cannot last, for hunters discover the 'monster' and 'rescue' the old man. Again driven from human society, the creature takes refuge in a crypt. Here he finds a female corpse, strokes its face, and mutters, "Friend." He spies from the shadows as Pretorius enters and prepares a meal on the casket of the dead woman who is to provide the bones for the "bride." The creature, ever in search of a friend, approaches the doctor, and a conversation ensues. Tempted by the necrophiliac 'devil,' the creature confesses, "I love dead. Hate living." Inspecting his future bride's skull, he marvels at the prospects offered by Pretorius: "Woman. Friend. Wife." The contrast between the pious hermit and the evil Pretorius thus personalizes the manichaeic forces driving the creature.

Now under the control of Pretorius, the creature abducts Elizabeth to blackmail Frankenstein into the "supreme collaboration" of constructing a female creature. Forced now against his will to work with the diabolical doctor, Frankenstein leads Pretorius and two assistants to his tower laboratory for the climactic creation scene. More elaborate and extravagant than its 1931 counterpart, this creation sequence is a powerful, frenzied montage of high and low-angle shots, canted, complementary Dutch angles, and percussive editing. At the end of it all, a mummy-like creature moves its hand and Frankenstein repeats the now obligatory words: "It's alive!"

Shortly thereafter we see the two scientists on either side of the now fully dressed female as they drop their ends of the flowing white 'wedding gown,' Pretorius ambiguously announcing, "The bride of Frankenstein." The musical score mimics wedding bells, and the 'bride' (played by Elsa Lanchester) steps forward. A series of shots, cutting in to ever closer views of her face, reveals a glamorous contrast to the first creature, but marked, nonetheless, by telling scars under her chin. Her movements are jerky, robot-like, and she screeches as the original 'monster' approaches and says, "Friend?" Looking confused, sad, and pleading, he takes her hand; a low-angle close-up of her face depicts the 'bride' screaming, rejecting her would-be mate.

Devastated, the creature threatens to destroy the tower by pulling a conveniently placed self-destruct lever. Even Elizabeth has appeared in time for the final catastrophe, trying to persuade Frankenstein to come with her. But he replies, "I can't leave them! I can't!"

The creature, however, insists, "Yes, go! You live!" And to Pretorius: "You stay. We belong dead." The camera reveals the creature's hand approaching the lever, followed by a hideous headshot of the bride hissing. The creature sheds a tear, pulls the lever, and the destruction commences. An external shot depicts the tower exploding, and we see Frankenstein and Elizabeth escaping in the nick of time. Ascending a hill, the couple embraces to watch the fireworks and the tower crumbling. The camera narrows in on them as Frankenstein utters, "Darling, darling." Fade to black and end of story.

The monster thus demonstrates his internalization of the hermit's lesson in morality; goodness and nature triumph over the forces of evil, and order is restored. If melodrama is a "drama of recognition," the creature's self-sacrifice implies the highest form of virtue's recognition. As Brooks emphasizes, the reward of virtue is secondary to its recognition in melodrama, virtuousness itself more important than the consequences of being good (27). The monster thus accepts death as the necessary price of virtue, and in Frankenstein and Elizabeth's closing embrace, in their final gaze at the decimation of the tower, we can imagine something like a feeling that justice has been served—'justice,' indeed, on a number of levels. First, the justice sought by the villagers has certainly been done: the monsters are dead. And simultaneously the monster himself has done justice to humanity, to normality: he has seen the error of his ways and spared the protagonist and his wife as a result. With the couple's gaze doubling that of the audience, this double sense of justice adds up to a happy ending and the sense that 'all's well that ends well.' It also allows the spectator to engage in a reciprocal doing of justice to the monster. Recalling the creature's transformation into humanity in the course of the film, the almost sentimental gaze of our heroes invites us to give the creature his due by accepting him as one of us for his honorable and morally upright act. We can see him now for what he has been all along: very much like us, with a sense of honor, dignity, justice, and respect for the natural order of things.

If the monster is crisscrossed by the forces of nature and anti-nature, only the destruction of his hybrid body can restore nature's reign. For this hybridity is at odds with the integrity of moral forces demanded by melodrama, and the monster's recognition of this, though it dictates death, is a triumph for that natural element of his

being. He sees that there can be no relief from his torments in the companionship of an equally hybrid body. Only those born wholly natural, like Frankenstein and Elizabeth, can share the rewards of virtue. The quest for a fitting body is over. "The only fitting body is a natural body," the film seems to tell us.

Melodramatic Incorporations III: Spectators, Bodies, and Ideology

But this is only half the story, and here we arrive at the question of ideology. Starting here and moving in concentrically larger circles from text to context, I hope to demonstrate, by way of conclusion, how Whale's *Frankenstein* films open up crucial questions concerning the incorporation of ideology in the spectatorship of melodrama.

First, we should note that the 'humanness' implicitly accorded the creature is in fact predicated on a misogynistic essentialization of gender roles. Having acquired language and internalized a basic morality, what the monster still lacks to be on a par with his human creator is the ability to reproduce sexually—indeed, he lacks 'sexuality' itself, his 'maleness' vis-à-vis a woman. The bride is therefore necessary for the monster's humanity. But she refuses to complete him and must therefore be destroyed—thus, paradoxically, completing him in negative fashion, by becoming Other to his Otherness, and giving him the opportunity to confirm the dominant patriarchal notion of humanity. Refusing to serve the creature's interest and submit to him in a pseudo-natural (heterosexual, procreative) relationship, the bride represents a recalcitrant, deviant form of feminine sexuality. She is monstrous in her failure to submit to male dominance. The death of this unnatural couple thus makes way for the 'happily ever after' of the normal, natural, heterosexual couple. Thus, there seems to be a certain ironic *injustice* in doing the monster the justice of accepting him as human. For his internalization of a humanistic morality (with the notions of justice, honor, etc.) has led not only to self-destruction (itself questionable enough), but also to his injustice towards—indeed the destruction of—the deviant Other. He has forgotten, in effect, his own Otherness in appropriating the dominant (male, heterosexual) ideology of humanity. The temptation to feel sympathy for the creature and to

accept him as human, then, reinforces the exclusionary sort of humanity that he has indeed achieved.

Originally, the film was to end quite differently: The final script, as well as the preview version of April 6, 1935—not quite two weeks before the premiere of the film as we know it—had both Frankenstein and Elizabeth dying in the tower along with the bride, the monster, and Pretorius (MacQueen). Whale changed his mind and reshot the ending just days before the April 19 opening, allowing the couple to live. Though his motives are unclear, the fact that Whale's last-minute decision followed the preview screening seems to suggest that it was a response to the audience's reception. Of course, the original ending codes a radically different message, one hard to square with the moral logic of melodrama; the change is thus of great significance, especially for someone like Whale, who, as a homosexual, was himself something of an outsider in Hollywood. That is, Whale had a personal stake in the ending of the film, for the triumph of normality at the expense of monstrosity includes an indictment of "deviant" sexualities. MacQueen reports an anecdote according to which Whale, while viewing the film years later, laughed out loud at the ending and was hushed by a woman who did not suspect his identity. It is speculated on this basis that Whale had given Hollywood audiences what they wanted, but in full consciousness of the ideological message of the changed ending. Accordingly, he was laughing at the simplistic expectations encoded in Hollywood conventions, but he was also ironically staging his own predicament: for he was forced through such conventions to deny his own outsider status and play to the expectations of the mainstream—expectations in which melodrama plays a major role.

This is not to say that Whale passively sacrificed himself and his Otherness in the face of a patriarchal studio system—not, at least, without raising serious questions. The creature's hybrid ontology problematizes the role accorded the body in melodrama: to the naturalization of morality implicit in melodrama's appeal to mute gesture, the monster opposes the possibility that behind culture's conventions lies not natural goodness but indeterminate monstrosity. In its hybridity, the monster is an ontologically 'queer' creature, and it is precisely queerness that is so threatening to the moral values of the villagers—to the integrity of all inhabitants, good or evil, of the melodramatic universe. In recoding mute embodiment as queer, Whale destabilizes the very premises that make possible the melo-

dramatic ending he gives the audience. But as the reaction of the woman in the anecdote reveals, that ending continues to function as a 'happy' one for (at least some) spectators. Not just an act of private irony, though, Whale's deconstruction of pre-linguistic nature sheds light on the moral 'logic' of melodrama and begins to illuminate the role of the spectator in the 'justification' of this system.

In a passage of central significance to Brooks's study of the melodramatic mode in the modern novel, Henry James remarks on Balzac that, though his characters don't act realistically, their actions accord with the moral drama in which they are seen to participate—"they owe their being to our so seeing them" (qtd. in Brooks 9). Generalizing on James's insight, we can say that the whole moral system of melodrama owes its existence to our noetic investment, our willingness to believe and to 'see' in a certain way. Indeed, this 'seeing as' is the central goal of melodrama, which aims at the inscription of moral values in the bodies it depicts and, reflexively, at the incorporation of these values into the bodies of its spectators. It naturalizes a normative version of 'the body' through its vague gesturing at ineffable meanings and demands of the spectator that the gap of incommensurability between individually lived embodiment and discursive constructions be neutralized. The ideological model of nature at the heart of melodrama's recourse to mute gesture is the means by which commensurability is sought, and this commensurability is to be the basis for a new moral consensus in the face of the post-sacred void.

The monster embodies the process: its queer incommensurability is transformed by the expressive means of linguistic articulation and the internalization of a sanctioned morality. Discourse and incorporation come together to complete the process whereby the melodramatic happy ending is enabled. But the zero degree of queerness and monstrosity—as opposed to the natural universalism of romantic goodness—points to our own starting position in the becoming-spectator of melodrama: we are first of all embodied beings, and on this level of mute (i.e. non-discursive) embodiment, no body is a fitting body. Melodrama is thus a normalizing technology aimed at taming the explosive potential of bodily difference; in this sense, melodrama is itself an invitation for the spectator to undertake the quest for a fitting body—his or her own. Whale's adaptation of the melodramatic mode allows, though, for a critical questioning of the ways in which non-discursive embodiment and discursive con-

structs of 'the body,' incorporation and inscription, come together in the creation of a spectator willing and able to enact the noetic 'seeing as' required by melodrama.

As we have seen, melodrama, as the "expressionism of the moral imagination," sets stock in mute gesture as a primordial language. As Brooks points out, though, it constantly comes up against the limits of expression resulting from gesture's "desemanticized" nature (68-75). This leads to problems in script-writing: how are the gestures to be described in terms other than the grandiose meanings to be conveyed? Concomitantly, spectators face the problem of how to interpret the gestures enacted on stage. Recourse is thus had to 'translators,' characters who explain the meanings to other characters and the audience. Perceiving the "close relationship between gesture and writing" (78), the modern novel in its melodramatic mode picks up on and transforms the problematics of the "mute text." According to Brooks, "gesture in the novel becomes, through its translation, fully resemanticized." The novel thus imagines "the identity of gesture and writing, *écriture*, [as] the inscription of meaning" (78).

Mute expression thus involves melodrama in a struggle over the relation between "incorporating acts" and "inscription"—terms N. Katherine Hayles invokes to explain the complex interplay between individual embodiment and 'the body' as a discursive construct (192-207). Embodiment is the monstrous, intractable condition of our non-discursive, individually and contextually instantiated state of physical being—a desemanticized *Leib*. 'The body' is a discursively defined normative ideal or average, the 'normal' or "fitting" body—a resemanticized *Körper*. Inscription practices record—and thereby transform by making commensurable to discourse—embodied being in the construct of the body. Incorporating practices, individually enacted gestures, are not, however, pure *Leib*—not the 'pure' language of primordial nature; nor are they identical with 'writing.' Gestures are possible only upon the basis of our embodiment (physicality is the precondition of their enactment), but they are always enacted in the social space of discourse. Gesture thus offers no escape from a degenerate linguistic code, but neither does language swallow our bodies whole. Incorporation involves a *negotiation* between an ineffable or monstrous embodiment and a normative body.

This negotiation helps to explain the process of the monster's becoming-human: here monstrosity—embodiment—clearly loses out to normativity. What I am suggesting, though, is that the interaction of incorporation and inscription is crucial to melodrama generally. On the narrative level, muteness poses an obstacle to expression, the eventual triumph over which indicates the resemanticization of gesture—the victory of discourse over the indeterminacy of embodiment. The ultimate significance of melodramatic incorporation lies, however, in its 'higher' goal of moral reconstruction. Ideologically, melodrama attempts to make 'humans' of us all, to make us *feel* the force of its moral imperatives, and for this purpose incorporation is indispensable. A 'successful' spectator, in the terms defined by melodrama, is one who truly incorporates melodramatic morality, whose enabling noetic investment in the melodramatic universe is grounded and expressed in normalized bodily practices and affects. Ideally, we enact the becoming-human of the monster in our becoming-spectator with regard to melodrama, transferring semanticized body images into our own bodily praxis; an 'appropriate' and 'humane' reaction to the monster's sacrificial consummation of humanity might be to shed a tear. Whale, in laughing, was himself a poor spectator of melodrama, a fact plausibly explained by his queerness—his refusal to become 'human' in the essentialized terms of a patriarchal mainstream. In connection with his queering of pre-linguistic nature, we can therefore read his films as an ironic critique of bourgeois, patriarchal ideology. But a straightforward reading remains a live possibility, as the reaction of the anecdotal woman reveals. Significantly, her irritation is expressed in a reproving bodily gesture aimed at silencing Whale's irreverent outburst. Ultimately, Whale's films are open to both sentimental and ironic readings. In their multi-leveled incorporations of melodrama, they thus gesture toward the fact that the hermeneutic strategies of spectators are differentially grounded in—and bounded by—their incorporations of ideology. In this way, *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* highlight the stakes of melodramatic incorporation and tell us *not* that "ideology is in the eye of the beholder," but that it is far more *in the body*.

Furthermore, there are crucial implications for cinematic spectatorship generally. As Miriam Hansen has documented, the figuration of "film as a new universal language [...] coincided in substance and ideology with the shift from primitive to classical

modes of narration and address that occurred, roughly, between 1909 and 1916" (79). At stake here was a normative conception of "the spectator" as opposed to the diverse masses of empirical audiences.⁶ The rise of the feature film (notably melodrama) and the development of narrative and formal devices designed to position the spectator with regard to diegesis, to absorb the viewer into the illusion of the screen and thereby divorce him (sic) from "the physical and social space" (83) of the venue—these point to the construction of a "viewer as a temporarily incorporeal individual" (84): a member of an essentialized human community without ethnicity, race, gender, or social class (80-81). The absorptive identification aimed at in the emerging classical style dictated, among other things, a shift from 'primitive' pantomimic acting to "naturalistic approaches that emphasized facial expression instead of broad physical gesture" and from characters "as moral or comic types" to "psychologically motivated individuals with whose predicaments, aspirations, and emotions the viewer could identify" (80). Karloff's monster, restricted as he was (initially) to the old pantomimic means, and whose scarred face complicated identification considerably, was in a sense a return of 'the primitive'; his hybridity points towards the deeper meaning of the "transitional" period of film—the transformation of corporeal audiences into incorporeal spectators. Open as they are to multiple readings, his monstrous corporality and ambiguous humanity highlight the practices of inscription and incorporation at play in the negotiation of spectatorship and offer a potential, if only partial, undoing of the by then long-established classical spectator. Ultimately, the monster points us toward a rediscovery of what Hansen calls the "significant margin [that remained even in the classical era] between textually constructed molds of subjectivity and their actualization on the part of historical viewers" (90). It is this margin, I would suggest, which lends melodrama—with its excesses and hindrances to "absorptive realism"⁷—the radical *potential* to unmask its own normalizing methods of incorporation.

⁶ See Hansen, Chapter 2. See also Kuhn for the distinction between audiences and spectators in the context of melodrama.

⁷ The term is Singer's (177).

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VANESSA KÜNNEMANN

'Staging the Chinese for the West': Melodramatic Dimensions in Pearl S. Buck's Novels and the Film Adaptation of *The Good Earth*

"Boys Meets Girl and They Live Happily Ever After?" Introducing *The Good Earth*

"You are the earth." A man is standing on the open fields of his estate and cries out these words in reference to his wife who has just passed away. Some moments before, he was leaning over his beautiful companion who—weak and pale—was lying on her richly-ornamented bed. He now thinks back to their first encounter years ago at the house of a rich family where she had been working as a servant until he, the peasant, came and picked her up in order to marry her. Their married life in the countryside has been shaped by ups and downs: an ever grim father telling his son that a proper wife should be there to do the household work, the births of three sons and a retarded daughter, locust swarms that destroy the family's harvest, a long draught resulting in a famine that makes the family abandon their land in order to struggle for survival in the big city. During all those years and struggles, topped by political turmoil in the country, the couple stood by each other, ultimately increased their land and property, and finally made a fortune. The husband cheated on her, but she could forgive and forget, knowing all along she was the 'one' for him. Their sons have grown to become healthy young men—the promise and the heirs of their parents. After a long illness, which the wife bravely mastered without ever complaining, she has just died. Indeed, she was "the earth" to him, and life without her will be different forever.

This is the melodramatic climax of what could be called a true 'rags-to-riches' story, a 'Westernized boy-meets-girl' love plot (Conn 192) along the lines of the notorious Hollywood romance delighting female audiences and deterring male viewers. The scene and plot outlined above stem from the 1937 film version of Pearl S.